

short dark oracles

SARA LEVINE



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DEB OLIN UNFERTH, *Final Judge*

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[a journal and press]

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Box 82588, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania 15218

www.caketrain.org

caketrainjournal@hotmail.com

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oracle

HE WAS TELLING her about his psychic powers. He was brushing his teeth as he spoke, standing about six feet from the bed where she lay, and he mentioned a time when he'd gone to Mexico and then come back and had a vivid dream about a girlfriend he hadn't seen in years—Caitlin North-Crowley—*and the next day, Caitlin North-Crowley called.* “Isn't that strange?” he said, his mouth foaming with toothpaste. “And there have been other incidents, too.” But she wasn't considering his psychic powers; she was feeling the alien reach of his past, the places he'd been, the girlfriends he'd fucked, the girlfriends she'd never unthorn by

meeting them at a party, on the street, at the store. *Who were these women?* she thought and sunk underground, a fleshy bulb deep in the earth whose tubers unfurled and crawled but could never reach him where he stood on the top-soil. He walked into the bathroom and spat.

must we stoop for violets in the hedge?

WHEN I WAS a child my hair was cut so that my head resembled the shape of a cauliflower. Not once, but repeatedly. Often I'd stand in front of the mirror, patting its uncertain contours and crying.

“Hey hey hey, that's all right,” my father would say. “Maybe if you smiled more.”

Walking down the street with it, I studied the hair's unnatural undulations in my shadow as it loomed above me, spiny and monstrous.

THERE IS A WOMAN with whom I am no longer speaking, though her company helped me through a difficult time. Whenever this woman called me on the phone, I'd say, "Hello," and she would say, "What's the matter?" It was flattering for a while, this devoted scrutiny of my emotions, her handling of even my lightest remarks with concern, but soon our conversations became tedious.

This friend of mine is not a beautiful person, and yet I notice she requires compliments and takes them well—the sort of compliments I am suspicious of and would never believe if given to me—and she put the idea in my head that my parents did me a disservice by never suggesting that I was pretty. "Didn't they ever say _____?" she asked, and what struck me as odd was not so much that my parents didn't, but that hers—apparently, with some lunatic frequency—did. She has somehow absorbed it, believes she is pretty and has a right to be told so. In fact, she is rather heavy. A feral hair grows out from her chin.

There is something unwholesome about her features which should not be photographed and cannot be explained.

So there I was, with this friend of mine who was not a friend but who behaved like a friend since I had failed to inform her of our troubled relations. We were eating soup in a restaurant, and I was enraged, but inconspicuously so. The night before she had

gone to hear a poet read and was now enmeshed in visions the poet had presented. Her spoon hung over her soup as she talked. I ate steadily, knowing that kind of enthusiasm is impossible to match. Also I never listen to poetry. I never read poetry. She wears a shirt that says *Long Live John Clare*. “Well,” she said at last, “you have cut your hair since I last saw you,” though clearly—*clearly!*—I did not want to discuss it.

I took my next trip to the restaurant alone. I had recently cut my hair and was preoccupied with the prospect of it growing out.

BEFORE MY MOTHER’S chemotherapy, she was warned, by a number of doctors, that she would lose her hair, so she went to a wig shop, in the company of her least frank friends, and was fitted for a wig that closely resembled her own hair. The fact that this hair style had never flattered my mother’s face was of no importance to her; the fact that it curved in an unlovely way about her ears, or that Clairol Number 7 and a habit of spending hours in the sun without hat or scarf had helped her to obtain a reddish blonde color that looked implausible next to her ruddy skin—these facts, as I say, did not matter. Her only desire was to retrieve some version of the self she knew.

In photographs that I keep from this period, the wig roosts on my mother’s head like an unfortunate bird, or perhaps not like

the bird at all but like its excrement, the surprisingly hardy loosening of its bowels, and this woman is a parody of my mother, a puppet I have propped up on the couch; her posture is bad, and she seems to have aged, rather rapidly, thirty years.

I FOUND MY BROTHER weeping in the backyard. He was walking around an apple tree that had fragrantly burst forth into bloom. Two or three blossoms had fallen and clung to his hair.

“Stretched out in the bed and it looks as though she’s already died,” he said. “I was there,” he added by way of explanation, “and couldn’t stay.”

I looked at my hands to conceal my annoyance. They are such small hands they often provoke exclamation, but on close inspection you will notice the largeness of my thumb, which I am said to have inherited from peasant ancestors. My fingers are short and stubby; my nails, too wide to bother polishing; and my cuticles, also untended, have grown rather bulky. On the top of my right hand there is a burn mark which has regularly prompted my mother to say, “No one will want to hold that hand.”

“The doctors say her chances are good. The cancer is only in her breast and lymph nodes, you know. Do you know what a lymph node is?”

“Yes,” he sniffed.

My own notion was a little bit foggy. The doctor had gone over key terms, but I hadn't absorbed them.

"Anyway, she can't expect to have visitors all the time," I said.

Once I came upon her caring for the wig, washing it delicately in the sink. She was quite fierce on the point that I keep my distance, guarding the thing the way a she-bear guards its young, or so they say (I am usually faking my references to the animal kingdom). I don't say that I was jealous of the thing, but she spent an awful lot of time soaking it and swishing it about in the solution, and her gestures were those of one who has done more than come to terms with her misfortune. There was a dramatic, *see-how-I-have-been-suffering* quality to it, a niggardly pleasure taken in washing her disunited head of hair in front of me.

AFTER THE CANCER, she took to wearing rich, full-flowing capes made for her by a friend who is a costume designer of a lyric opera company. The wig, which had spent its nights on a foam head, was drowned (another ritualistically reckless moment) in the neighbors' pool, then tossed unceremoniously into our garbage pail, where it remained until "garbage day," which happened to be six days later. I don't know what transpired in that voluminous head or rat-sized heart of hers, but after this

incident it became evident that her baldness no longer shamed her; in fact, she displayed her head with a regal pride.

I saw her occasionally about the house, when I came around to read the paper or eat a bowl of cereal. On these occasions she seemed to regard me in a stiff and uncommunicative way. If she was angry, she didn't say. But she was careless enough to leave a notebook lying around, a conspiratorial black leather diary sort of thing, which betrayed—one rainy afternoon when she had gone up to the attic to make sure the windows were closed—that she was writing *pensées*, auto-portraits, and haiku:

This mole on my arm
Blossoms like a velvet seed—
Could it be melanoma?

A little while later, she stripped the house of unnatural fabrics, stocked the cabinets with ginseng, and took up the less aerobic versions of the martial arts. She liked to practice Tai Chi in the parks or on a grassy, highly public plot off Mayfield, where passersby could admire the grace of her movements and snicker at the grossness of her enormous, bald head.

Her transformation did not affect me. I was preoccupied with my own matters.

I HAD, FOR INSTANCE, begun to look after my education. When I was young, I had gone to boarding school (a very fine one, nestled on a lake, the name of which I forgot, constantly, even when I went to school there; I often lose my way), but it failed to provide me with solid grounding. For years I had gotten by pretending to be bored with things that, in fact, I could only dimly recognize, let alone understand. After a while it began to bother me that there were many things I did not know, such as where the Baltic Sea was, or the exact meaning of this term *horsepower*. These are things that schoolchildren know, and yet I did not know them.

My plan (conceived after I had spent twelve hours in front of the television, wrapped in a blanket, eating cereal) was to purchase a magazine from the newsstand each week and read it, cover to cover, even the parts which did not interest me and which relied chiefly on words I did not know, to read slowly and force myself to think about the ramifications of every sentence. Usually I took the magazine to a café and rewarded myself, upon the completion of columns or paragraphs, with sips of a hot chocolate. The rate at which I read meant that I never finished a drink until it was cold.

If I kept this up for a matter of weeks, assiduously I mean, I thought that the reading could not help but make an impression.

But the thing was not as easy to do as I thought. My attention wandered; I read captions several times before I brought myself to read paragraphs. I allowed myself to skip over any essays on economics, urban renewal or war. My eyes slid to advertisements. I began to feel discouraged. It dawned on me that I was, inescapably, a trivial and impenetrable person.

Naturally, I blamed my parents for not raising me to be deeper. Other people did chores when young, were given encyclopedias, prodded with flash cards, urged toward atlases, quizzed at dinner, crammed with facts, whereas I was generally left alone with a Lite-Brite and a collection of glass animals I called The Nine O'clock Club because I pranced them across my belly until nine each night. It was an outlandish scene, upon reflection, and realizing how poorly I had been raised, and how angry I was about it, I found it necessary to distance myself. I saw my brother from time to time, for why would I hold him responsible? He was just as narrow-minded and shallow as I was, although he had learned to play "The Foggy Dew" on the clarinet, which gave him a shimmer of culture that I lacked.

UPON SEEING MY MOTHER pass proudly through the street in one of her capes, her prominent baldness gleaming in the afternoon sun, I remarked to myself, "There is a woman who will

die—not of breast cancer, but of skin cancer, at the age of sixty-five, because she has failed to screen her head.”

I spoke too loudly.

“We used to be close. I remember when you would hug my knees,” she said. “I remember when you would wet your bed to get my attention.”

“I wonder,” I said, “was that necessary?”

“That’s the trouble with you,” she said. “You’re always asking rhetorical questions. When you were in the seventh grade I used to hear you with your friends. You would say startling, unanswerable things like, ‘Must we stoop for violets in the hedge?’ If you ever cared to ask sincere questions, you just might get sincere answers.”

“What is sincerity?” I asked.

She moved on.

No doubt she was carrying a grudge because I didn’t visit her more often in the hospital. I went once, on the morning she was recovering from surgery. I had been asked to deliver her eyeglasses and stopped short in the doorway of the hospital room. She sat in the bed, surrounded by bunched-up vases of flowers, unrecognizably small (except for her head) and shriveled in the bedclothes. She was trying to brush her teeth without a sink. A plastic basin stood on the bed tray.

I approached and gave her the glasses. She was tired and listless and didn't seem interested. For a while she said nothing.

"What will life be like for Rita without her breast?" my aunt had asked me, clutching my hands. I never saw my mother's breasts, except on occasions when we changed our swimsuits in the cabana.

DON'T MOST PEOPLE between the ages of eighteen and twenty-five devote themselves to a process of self-discovery during which they give no quarter to the weak and repugnant members of the family?

"It seems to me," said my friend, "that you are always getting your hair cut."

IN THE RESTAURANT'S squalid ladies' room, an old woman was vomiting, stall door flung wide open; the other stall was locked. I approached the mirror. By this time I was feeling anxious to have a look, to see if my newly destroyed head of hair had softened a bit, rearranged itself into something windblown, more organic, less severe. Only I can never look in a mirror when someone else is around. I was afraid the woman vomiting in the stall might turn around and catch me in the private ritual, which includes a slow studied lean into the mirror in order to canvass the pores of my

nose. I have a large nose and my pores are open, as they say, for business. Cold water does nothing, despite what the magazines claim.

Returning to the table, I smiled at anyone who accidentally looked my way. I smiled at the waiter so often I confused him. I smiled at this man across from me, my date, who was not really a date, who was helping himself to the coleslaw. I was going through a phase in which it was difficult to eat, that is to say I needed to eat but did not like to feed myself because I was so disgusted with my personality at the time. So it was hard for me to look upon someone who fed himself so flagrantly. I really could not understand it or relate to his impulse at all.

The big feeder crushed a baseball hat onto his small head (visor front-wise). This was not beauty. How far from beauty it was, I cannot say.

“You,” I said, “are nothing but bad breath in a hat,” and the formulation struck me as very deliciously funny. Unamused, the man asked a question that seemed to allude to some unspoken but shared perception of the inferior style of my hair. It was not a direct comment, but seeing the depreciative look in his eye, my mind bucked forward, and I knew.

the fainting couch

I

AS SHE HAD DEVOTED the larger part of her life to that piece of furniture, they had grown accustomed to her there: not dead, but with her eyes closed and wishing fervently that she might be. It was no longer necessary to toe it around her; you could laugh, whistle, fart, rip a sheet of paper from a spiral notebook. In the midst of this activity, she would lie, eyes closed as if she were sleeping, a musty odor of melon surrounding her body like a moat.

“Have you grown accustomed to the look of me?” she would ask the child and his father. “Have you tired of me? Don’t you think I know what a burden I am to you? Don’t you think I have tired of myself?” She might go on like this for days until the desire to provoke them dissipated.

The child didn’t go near her unless asked to bring a blanket or a tray. On occasion, he peeled an orange for her and had perfected a technique whereby he rolled the orange between his palms to loosen the peel so that it came off in one large piece. After he handed over the fruit, he studied the empty peel in his hand, thinking how the pores of the peel were not unlike the pores of a person’s nose.

Sometimes when she got up to go to the bathroom, the father and the child did a quick search and found the oranges uneaten under the cushions of the couch.

“Your poor mother,” the father would say. “She just gets so tired, doing for you and me all the time. She has been on the fainting couch for fifteen years. Perhaps if she ate more citrus...”

On hearing this, the mother would open her eyes and grab her hair at the roots. With a gust of wind the couch would levitate and wheel around the room, grazing the ceiling and rattling the glass beads on the chandelier, and all the while the mother rode, her body so rigid and her eyes so wide and her scream so

relentless and terrible, she speckled the walls with her saliva. She always landed a few minutes later and was calmer.

The boy grew up to be a very nice person.

2

WHEN I AM DEAD, lay me down on a fainting couch. Pretend, briefly, that I have bent like a branch in the breath of bad news. Fetch smelling salts. (I will have them.) Fan my brow.

Sweetheart, I wouldn't dare pronounce judgment on you, and I hope you won't judge me. It frightens me that I might die in an unseemly position—with a grimace, on the toilet, in a posture that would embarrass us all. Promise to lay me down on the fainting couch, and I know I shall look dignified and peaceful. I shall look as I do when you come home from work and I'm down for a nap. What do you always say? Like your kitten!

When you have grown accustomed to the look of me there (dead on the fainting couch) call my mother. There will be a delay, even if she tells you she is dressed and will be right over. My death will creep into your heart and you will wait as she sweeps the garage or removes the slick from the drain board. If you are out of your mind, just stand in the pod of the curtain

and breathe. When at last she comes, open the door and take her arm. She loves that. Remove her coat and lead her to the fainting couch. Draw the shades, but do not leave her alone with me. She'll see the amethyst ring from Brazil and take it back.

If I am not wearing shoes, would you please put them on?
Thank you.

I have a strong presentiment that I will die in the morning. I have a strong presentiment I will die and smell of lemons. It will be a weekday, I feel sure. Pick up the mail and deliver my last letters to the fainting couch, and please see to it that I am not arrayed with any flyers from the electronics store. They keep sending them and sending them, because once we bought a battery. If you love me, darling—*do* you love me, darling?—you will remember what for.

3

OUTSIDE THE THEATRE, a woman fell and turned her ankle like a key. In haste, in search of aid, her companion, a tall, bushy-bearded man, pushed his way through the crowd and knocked me over. As I joined the first woman on the pavement, my own ankle twisting beneath me in pain, I thought of the hand that had laid itself on my elbow, taking with it my equilibrium. It had been a

long time since I had been touched. The hand had felt warm and good, not a caress but a tactile experience. Besides, I had wanted to lie down in the middle of a crowd before, but had no excuse.

A stretcher came for the woman who had fallen. Naturally, it came for her; she had fallen first. She talked the whole time as they put her up. “This is an indignity,” she said. “I’m sure I can walk. He’s overreacting,” she said of her companion. “I could hump along if I had someone against whom I could lean.”

She said it like that: *against whom I could lean. Just the kind of person who goes to the theatre*, I thought.

As I waited, I entertained myself with other thoughts, but the stretcher did not return. The street grew empty, the sky grew dark. I had lost the feeling of the hand on my elbow, the hand that had been warm and good. At last, I got up.

I limped through the parking lot, which was empty, through the streets, which were dirty, and I came to a park where a man sat on a bench. Was he a strong man? I didn’t know. A good man? I couldn’t tell. An old man, a poor man, a blind man—judgments I did not make. I waited until I got right in front of him and then swooned. Down I came with a thundering noise, because that’s how people faint—not like a feather, but like a sack of potatoes tumbling off the larder shelf. When I came to, the man was leaning over my face and taking my pulse or my wrist-watch, it didn’t matter to me which.

a promise

EVERY MORNING, I leave the house at seven to get the seven-twenties train and my daughter wakes up at six fifteen, which means I spend forty-five minutes with her, including the time I'm making toast, rushing her out of her diaper, coaxing her to the bathroom so I can brush my teeth and fix my hair.

Last Monday the babysitter's late, and when Thea crawls up in my lap and yanks my earring, I snap at her. Then I feel bad and try to explain in terms a kid can understand.

"Mommy's anxious because she's got to catch the train," I say, and her eyes light up like she's forgiven me—the thing about

kids, they really can live in the present—so I tell her about the train and the conductor who goes *punch punch punch* on everybody's tickets.

“Why?” Thea says.

“Because there's no such thing as a free ride.”

“Why?”

“Because everybody who rides the train has to buy a ticket, that's what helps the train go.”

Then the babysitter shows up, all bedraggled and heavy with sleep. I kiss Thea goodbye, and on the train, a funny thing happens: the conductor walks right past me, going *punch punch punch* on everybody else's card.

SO IT'S A SMALL THING, but I like that free train ride—three bucks it saves me—and maybe it's living with a two-year-old who asks *why* about every little thing, but I wonder why it happens. The conductor walks by as if he sees me and he doesn't care.

Next morning, Thea's eating toast, I'm rushing around making baked macaroni, and Thea asks me why I'm cooking—a good question since I don't often make dinner at six a.m.

“Mommy's got a potluck after work.”

“Why?” Thea says.

“This woman I work with is leaving. We're having a party, and everybody brings a dish so nobody has to do all the cooking.

It's nice," I say, despite the fact that I've been cursing since I started. "It's nice to share the cooking!"

And the babysitter, for once in her dazed life, arrives on time, and I get on the train, and the conductor goes *punch punch punch* on everybody's ticket but mine, and I'm thinking, great, three bucks, I can get a cappuccino. Except for the free ride, it's a normal, which is to say, exhausting day, until I go to the potluck, put my macaroni on the table, and at eight p.m. Marilyn says, "Here, we had too much food, your macaroni's gone, but don't take an empty dish. Take the casserole, Thea can eat it," so I take the train home with a week's worth of Greek casserole—lamb, feta, artichokes, and avocado—something I'd never make. Which is delicious.

THE NEXT DAY, I don't understand what's happening, but when I scoop Thea into my lap that morning, I decide to test my luck.

"Every night I get home from work at seven p.m. and do you know what? You're already in bed! Fast asleep!"

She sucks on her teddy bear's ear. "I *know* that."

"Don't you want to ask me why?"

"No."

"Ask me why, Thea."

"Why did you say ask me why, Mommy?"

“Because,” I say, riding over the second question, “my job goes eight to six, that’s what a grown-up job is, you work the hours your boss tells you. And it’s very important you work as hard as everybody else if you want to earn the same money.”

I could tell she’d lost the thread, there’s only so much you can tell her before she rips the clothes off her bear, but I figure I’m compelled to say the whole thing, especially the part about equal pay for equal work. Then the babysitter comes, and I kiss Thea goodbye, get on the train, the conductor goes *punch punch punch* on every ticket but mine, and at work, Mr. Cheshire, my boss, goes, “Why don’t you cut out at four today?”

“Sure?”

“Sure.”

“Sure sure?”

“Sure.”

So I send the babysitter home early, eat Greek casserole with Thea, run a lavender vanilla crème brûlée bubble bath, pack her into her snuggly pajamas, and fall asleep in the bed beside her, her artichoke and feta breath moist on my cheek. Which is great. This also saves me twenty dollars in babysitting money, not that it’s the main thing.

EVERY DAY IT KEEPS HAPPENING: the train ride downtown is free, the boss keeps finding reasons for me to cut out early, and I

keep testing it. I'm not going to change the world; I wish I could change it for other people, but if I have a chance to change it for myself, well, why not?

So every day I rush to tell Thea more and more things. I start small and modest—like, do unto others as you would have them do unto you—but everything I mention, I get immediate results. It's like God is rewarding me for trying to set my kid straight, giving her the moral goods early. The day I explain health insurance, it occurs to me we're a long way from the toddler-appropriate *punch punch punch* story. Thea squirms in my lap and shouts, "I want to get down! I want to get down!" but I know if I just keep talking, I can get us flu shots for nothing, and the next time she has an ear infection, it will truly be no big deal. So I swing my leg over her knees and pin back her arms just long enough to explain the HMOs and co-payments and the five-hundred-dollar deductible. And what do you know, that night when I get home, there's a refund check from Blue Cross Blue Shield for the whole year's expenses, which the next day I deposit, sweating lightly.

Soon I've worked it so I'm pulling in a paycheck for a sixty-hour week, but only working till noon. I start a savings fund for Thea, and I'm still paying for the train ride only one way—irks me a little, the mystery of having to pay on the way back—and the health insurance is free, and the neighbor lady's stopped

asking me for favors, and all my favorite charities are writing me letters—thank you for helping Ronald McDonald, Buddy Dog Humane Society, Safe Haven, Camp Sunshine—even though I haven’t given a thing.

One day the babysitter says to me, “I love Thea so much, you don’t have to pay me,” and that’s when I really wake up to the possibilities.

“This is a charmed life we live, isn’t it?” I tell Thea. “Mommy really enjoys our special talks.” But Thea won’t sit on my lap, even when I get her in a headlock, and when the babysitter comes, Thea grabs her hand and they hustle off to her room before we’ve even finished breakfast. They close the door.

I LOVE MY LIFE more than ever, and that’s why I open the door and say, admittedly out of the blue, “Hey, Thea, you and I are going to die.”

She looks up from her jigsaw puzzle, her eyes large and tremulous, and I remind her about this ladybug she used to chat up in the kitchen. “Remember how the ladybug flew into the spider web and the spider kept jumping on top of it?” Thea hides her face in the babysitter’s lap and I tell her about my dog Burly who got hit by a car and my mother’s stomach cancer and leaky esophagus and my father’s diabetes and heart failure, and then I explain the recent disappearance from the playground of the

Markovic boy who fell out of an apartment window and died of skull fractures and brain contusions. Thea is sobbing, but I press on. “And if they don’t get murdered or sick or have an accident, people get so old and miserable they can’t eat an orange, or sing a song, or ride a bike, or watch the moon, or even remember who they are. And then, Thea, they just give up and stop breathing. Nobody can escape it, sugar plum, that’s why both of us are going to die one day. It’s like a promise.”

“Why?” screams Thea, her face streaked with tears.

And even though she is shrieking and throwing her puzzle pieces against the wall, I walk off to the train and I know everything is going to be fine.

fiction \$8 US

“This book is a wonder. I laughed out loud early and kept on laughing, sometimes with recognition, sometimes with sheer delight at the precision with which Levine portrays the bafflement of being human and interacting with other humans. Read *Short Dark Oracles* for yourself and prepare to be both charmed and alarmed.”

Mathea Harvey, author of *Modern Life*

“Hemingway said somewhere that he wanted to write like Cezanne painted. In her vivid hyper-real collection, *Short Dark Oracles*, Sara Levine paints her way into even sharper and more dangerous corners. The fictions are an impasto of primed primary colors, prose that cuts a swath in brilliant swatches of saturated power that pops, punches, turns every turn into a fat flat facet, hard as a side of diamond, steel still-lives, glittering, metallic, distilled. Ernest be damned, I want to write like Sara Levine writes.”

Michael Martone, author of *Four for a Quarter*

“Levine’s narrators are self-aware, self-deprecating, sardonic and more than a little funny. ‘The Fainting Couch’ alone is worth the price of admission, but *Oracles* offers other treasures just as lovely.”

Cooper Renner, author of *Mosefolket*

“Hilarious and triumphant, these stories will startle you on every page, and on every page you will marvel over Levine’s intelligent, passionate mind.”

Deb Olin Unferth, author of *Revolution*

Short Dark Oracles was the runner-up manuscript in the 2010 Caketrain Chapbook Competition, as judged by Deb Olin Unferth.

CAKETRAIN

Box 82588, Pittsburgh, PA 15218

Contact: caketrainjournal@hotmail.com / www.caketrain.org

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